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ABSTRACT

This booklet for Oklahoma parents provides guidelines for selecting a child care setting that best suits the child, the family, and the work situation. It delineates 13 steps in choosing a child care arrangement and lists child care options such as centers, family day care homes, and in-home care arrangements. The role of state licensing is discussed and the responsibilities of licensing representatives are explained. A checklist for parents to use to assess a potential child care setting for their child includes the areas of supervision, caregivers, daily activities, health and safety, nutrition, guidance and discipline, infant and toddler care, and arrangements for children with special needs. Warning signs indicating a poor quality setting are also described. Suggestions for preparing children for entering a new child care setting are included. The importance of continued parental involvement in child care is highlighted. Included are ways parents can respond to suspected child abuse in a child care setting, strategies for reducing childhood illnesses, and general tips for a successful child care experience. A list of resources concludes the booklet. (KB)

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THE ABC'S OF QUALITY CHILD CARE

PARENT HANDBOOK

ED 413 076

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OKLAHOMA DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
OFFICE OF CHILD CARE

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Choosing child care may be the most important decision you will make as a parent. We know that children are influenced primarily by their homes and parents, but the preschool child of parents who work full-time may spend a major portion of her waking hours in child care. The quality of those hours will shape a child's physical, social and intellectual development for years to come.

When possible, begin your search when you know you will be having or adopting a child. At a minimum, plan on beginning the process at least two months before your child will need care. In some communities, child care providers have waiting lists.

You can identify child care options by contacting the licensing representative through the local DHS office. Some counties are also served by a child care resource and referral agency that will help match your needs with local providers. You may wish to check your local newspaper, telephone book or talk to friends and relatives to locate licensed care.

This handbook will help you choose a child care setting that best suits your child, your family and your work situation. Take time to be a smart consumer - you are making a critical investment!

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STEPS IN CHOOSING CHILD CARE

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1. List the things you feel are important for your child and you, such as type of care, atmosphere, hours and location.
2. Learn about the different kinds of child care and how to identify quality care.
3. Collect names of potential child care providers.
4. Screen several child care providers over the phone to determine openings, hours, number and ages of children, cost, services, etc.
5. Visit more than one program. Although an initial appointment is recommended, stop by unannounced to observe at different times of the day.
6. Look for the state license.
7. Look at all spaces used by children, observe the caregivers and children and be sure to ask all of your questions during the visits.
8. Check references on your final choice(s).
9. Make an appointment to review the licensing file at the DHS office.
10. Take your child to visit the final choice(s).
11. Trust your intuition and your observations.
12. Read the provider's parent handbook or written policies and procedures carefully.
13. Have an alternative caregiver in case your child is ill or your provider goes on vacation or is closed.

CHILD CARE OPTIONS

5

After identifying your family's and child's needs, the next step is considering various child care options.

Child Care Centers care for eight or more children and provide care during set hours and days of the week.

Centers Providing Drop-in Services provide care for children on a drop-in basis and meet the needs of parents seeking occasional or part-time care.

Part-day Programs care for eight or more children, generally offering preschool or mother's day out programs, for more than 15 and up to 30 hours a week.

Family Day Care Homes offer care for up to seven children in the provider's own home.

In-home Care means hiring someone to come into your home and care for your child.

Relative Care may be in the child's or the relative's home.

THE ROLE OF LICENSING–

6

The 1963 Oklahoma Child Care Facilities Licensing Act requires that all child care facilities be licensed by the Department of Human Services. Programs that operate less than 15 hours per week and care provided by a relative or in the child's own home are exempt from the law.

Choosing a licensed home or center will help to ensure that your child is safe, that the caregivers are trained and that the facility meets certain requirements. A license does not guarantee that the quality of a child care facility will meet every parent's or child's needs, but it does mean that a trained professional is working to help the staff meet minimum state requirements for a safe and suitable environment for your child.

Licensing Representatives

- Make periodic unannounced visits during the year to consult with caregivers and check to make sure they are meeting requirements for the state license.
- Provide parents with the names of child care providers in their area.
- Maintain case records on licensed providers that can be reviewed upon request by parents (names of all children and families are removed from these records to protect their privacy).
- Investigate complaints that licensing requirements are not being met.
- Offer or sponsor training for child care providers.

You can help your caregiver by not requesting anything that will put her out of compliance with licensing requirements, such as taking more children than she is licensed for, asking her to use physical punishment or not keeping immunization records up-to-date.

You, the caregiver and the licensing representative can work together to ensure the best possible care for your child. As a parent, you have the primary responsibility for monitoring your child's care. As a team, we can strive for quality child care for all children.

CHILD CARE CHECKLIST– Basics

8

A well-operated program functions smoothly under the direction of someone with knowledge of early childhood education as well as business skills. Providing written policies for parents and encouraging parent involvement may be two signs of a strong program.

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Is the program licensed?
☐	☐	Is written information on program philosophy, hours, fees, vacations, etc. provided?
☐	☐	Are you welcome to visit the program at any time, to observe, eat lunch with your child or help with a special event?

CHECKLIST– Supervision

9

Learn how many children and caregivers are in your child's group, room or class. There should be sufficient staff so that children are never left unattended. Smaller group size results in more staff interaction with children, more focused activities by children and less conflict.

YES NO

- ☐ ☐ Are there enough staff to meet children's needs? (refer to a copy of licensing requirements to check minimum staff-child ratios)
- ☐ ☐ Is the size of the group comfortable for staff and children?
- ☐ ☐ Are classes combined at the beginning and end of the day when fewer children and staff are present?

CHECKLIST– Caregivers

10

The single most important element in child care is the caregiver, so it's vital to look for someone with whom you're comfortable. To evaluate a caregiver, watch the children and see how they respond to her. Does the caregiver:

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Appear energetic, in good health and able to keep up with children?
☐	☐	Seem calm, patient and gentle with children?
☐	☐	Appear to be warm and friendly with a good sense of humor?
☐	☐	Greet children upon arrival and act happy to see them?
☐	☐	Understand what children can and want to do at different stages of growth?
☐	☐	Respond promptly when children need attention?
☐	☐	Appear child-oriented and speak to children at their eye level?
☐	☐	Help the children feel good about themselves, their activities and other people?
☐	☐	Encourage children to express themselves in creative ways?
☐	☐	Call each child by name, treating each one as an individual?
☐	☐	Seem to be someone your child will enjoy being with?

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Eagerly talk to parents about their child's daily experiences?
☐	☐	Seem to be someone you can develop a relaxed, sharing relationship with?
☐	☐	Have training in child development, first aid, CPR?
☐	☐	Have experience in working with young children?
☐	☐	If religious values are taught, are they acceptable to you?

CHECKLIST– Daily Activities

12

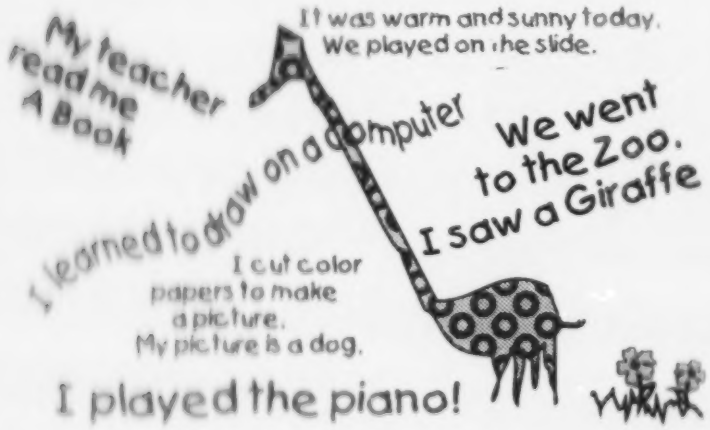
Daily activities are those events planned for children as part of their normal routine. Children need a range of activities, from group to individual play, from games to music, from quiet activities to noisy ones. Since young children learn by doing, their play areas must provide a creative atmosphere, plenty of space and a variety of equipment.

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Is there a balanced program of daily activities (free play, story time, naps, outside play, etc.)?
☐	☐	Is there a variety of activities geared to the age levels and needs of children?
☐	☐	Does the schedule show active and quiet times throughout the day?
☐	☐	Is the play area cheerful, colorful and welcoming to children?
☐	☐	Are there places to work alone, with a friend or in small groups?
☐	☐	Is there a plentiful supply, within a child's reach, of sturdy, colorful, creative materials (games, books, puzzles, blocks, etc.)?
☐	☐	Are girls and boys encouraged to participate in the same activities?
☐	☐	Are children given lots of opportunities to make choices?
☐	☐	Are there opportunities for music and movement activities?
☐	☐	Is children's artwork displayed where it is visible to children?

Daily Activities

13

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Is there play equipment available to stimulate your child's imagination (dress-up clothes, housekeeping toys, etc.)?
☐	☐	Do children experience success frequently?
☐	☐	Is television time limited, and then only to creative children's programs?
☐	☐	Do they offer special birthday or holiday activities?
☐	☐	Are children allowed to finish what they are doing before they are expected to go on to something else?
☐	☐	Are trips taken to nearby points of interest?
☐	☐	Are activities for school-age children relaxed, recreational and appropriate for their interests, skills and needs?
☐	☐	Do children look happy, active and occupied?


My teacher read me A Book
It was warm and sunny today. We played on the slide.
I learned to draw on a computer
We went to the Zoo. I saw a Giraffe
I cut color papers to make a picture. My picture is a dog.
I played the piano!

CHECKLIST– Health and Safety

14

One of the major goals of child care is to protect children from harm and illness. As parents, we know that children are curious and love to explore and that accidents can happen in a matter of seconds. With a large group of children to supervise, it is important that potential hazards be eliminated. Child care settings can also teach children healthy lifetime habits, such as handwashing and seat belt use.

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Are the rooms clean and free of hazards (check bathrooms, kitchen and all play areas)?
☐	☐	Are the rooms kept a comfortable temperature, well-ventilated and properly lighted?
☐	☐	Are any hazards within children's reach, such as medicines, cleaning products, matches or buckets of water?
☐	☐	Are there any sharp edges, uncovered electrical outlets or open stairs?
☐	☐	Are there smoke detectors, fire extinguishers and protected heaters?
☐	☐	Are fire drills held and emergency telephone numbers posted?
☐	☐	Is furniture and indoor and outdoor play equipment clean, safe and in good repair?
☐	☐	Do children have individual sleeping spaces with clean bedding?
☐	☐	Is large outdoor playground equipment anchored and surrounded by a cushioned surface?
☐	☐	Is the outdoor play area well-maintained and fenced or otherwise protected from traffic and other hazards?

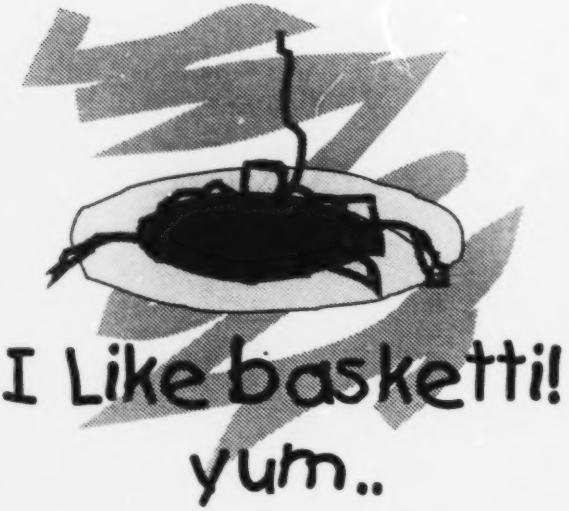
YES	NO	
☐	☐	Are children exposed to second-hand cigarette smoke?
☐	☐	Are there pets around children?
☐	☐	Are children encouraged to wash their hands after using the bathroom and before meals?
☐	☐	Are soap and paper towels within reach of children at handwashing sinks?
☐	☐	Do caregivers wash their hands after diapering or assisting a child with toileting and wiping noses?
☐	☐	If children are transported, are seat belts and child safety seats used?

CHECKLIST- Nutrition

16

Children need well-balanced meals for good physical, mental, emotional and social development. Meals are also an important time for children to develop social skills.

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Are children served nutritious meals and snacks?
☐	☐	Is a current menu available?
☐	☐	Do caregivers sit at tables with children during meals?
☐	☐	Is mealtime relaxed, unhurried and pleasant?
☐	☐	Are children allowed to serve themselves and get second helpings?



CHECKLIST- Guidance and Discipline

17

The goal of guidance and discipline is to help children develop self-control. Discipline should be educational in nature and appropriate to the child's age. Watch for or ask about the following:

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Do staff anticipate and eliminate potential problems?
☐	☐	Are children encouraged to cooperate with others, consider other children's feelings and solve problems by talking things out?
☐	☐	Do staff recognize and encourage good behavior more often than correcting misbehavior?
☐	☐	Are reasonable, consistent limits set for the protection of children?
☐	☐	Are the limits simple, understandable and clearly explained to children?
☐	☐	Are staff gentle but firm in helping children understand the rules?
☐	☐	Do caregivers redirect children by giving alternatives when behavior is unacceptable?
☐	☐	If children are removed from the group as a means of regaining self-control, are the periods of time age-appropriate? (One minute of time out for each year of a child's age is recommended.)
☐	☐	Does the program prohibit all forms of physical punishment, verbal abuse such as yelling, criticizing or comparing children, and withholding or forcing of food?
☐	☐	Does the caregiver share your beliefs on discipline?

CHECKLIST– Infant and Toddler Care

18

During these first years, children learn whether or not the world is a safe place where their needs will be met. Parents must carefully observe the child care setting since their child cannot tell them about the care they receive.

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Do caregivers spend time and seem to enjoy cuddling, playing with and talking to children?
☐	☐	Is feeding and diapering done in a loving, patient manner?
☐	☐	Are infants held while being bottle-fed?
☐	☐	Are caregivers supportive of a mother who is breast-feeding?
☐	☐	Is there a policy on parents providing food and formula for infants?
☐	☐	Are records on feeding, sleeping and diapering available to parents on a daily basis?
☐	☐	Are diapers changed when wet?
☐	☐	Are sanitary diaper-changing methods followed and the caregiver's hands washed after each diapering?
☐	☐	Are there potty chairs or child-size toilets available?
☐	☐	Do caregivers share your views on toilet training?
☐	☐	Is there enough space for children to explore and develop motor skills?
☐	☐	Is there a carpeted or soft area for infants to lie, roll and crawl?
☐	☐	Are infants and toddlers taken outside?

CHECKLIST– Children with Special Needs

19

All children have special needs . . . some more than others. Finding care for a child with special needs can be especially difficult. There are state and federal programs designed to provide help for children with disabilities. Call your local DHS office for more information. When seeking child care, observe or ask about the following:

YES	NO	
☐	☐	Does this program have other children with special needs?
☐	☐	How accepting are the staff, the other children and their parents?
☐	☐	How do caregivers encourage children's acceptance of each other?
☐	☐	Are activities adapted to allow everyone to participate?
☐	☐	Are caregivers able to provide extra assistance as needed during activities?
☐	☐	How will the environment be adapted to meet your child's needs?
☐	☐	What specialized training do caregivers have?

OTHER QUESTIONS

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Depending on whether you are interviewing a family day care home provider or a center director, the following questions may help to clarify your decision.

Tell me about yourself.

How long have caregivers worked in the program?

Will you be providing care for at least another year?

What would you do in a medical emergency, such as if a child was choking?

Will anyone I haven't met be caring for the children?

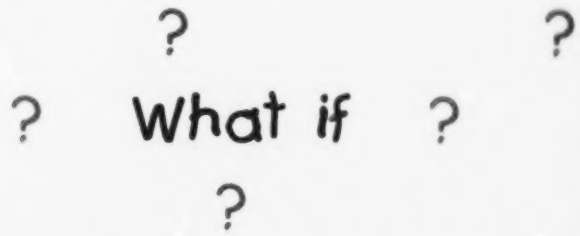
Are the children around any other adults?

Tell me what a typical day would be like for my child.

How would you handle a preschooler who refuses to eat lunch?

What are some things you hope my child will learn here? (Look for answers such as independence, to play with others, to enjoy books, and a sense of curiosity rather than academic goals).

What would you do if a preschooler deliberately hit another child?



What is your policy regarding sick children?

Is the program closed at certain times of the year?

What is the policy regarding payment for a child who is sick or misses certain days?

Can I have some names and telephone numbers of other families whose children you have cared for? (past and present)

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My mom asked how they take care of children

WARNING SIGNS

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Knowing what you shouldn't see in a child care setting is almost as important as knowing what should be there. Following are some things you should never see. If you do, it should be a warning that perhaps this is not the setting for your child.

You should never see:

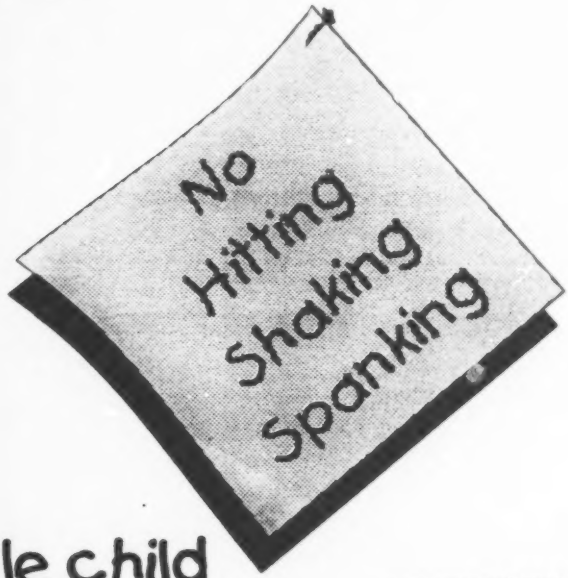
- A caregiver physically discipline a child (hitting, shaking, spanking)
- Unattended crying babies or children left unsupervised
- A child left out of sight and hearing of other children as a form of punishment
- Babies left in one place, i.e., cribs, playpens, swings or infant seats, for a long time
- Babies with bottles propped
- Children being forced into potty training
- Caregivers making fun of children for any reason
- Children fighting without adults stepping in
- Food used as a bribe or punishment

My mom said no one should hit or shake or spank a

- A child scolded harshly or embarrassed in front of other children
- A child left in a wet or dirty diaper too long
- Parents being told to drop their child off at the office or to call before visiting.

Filing a complaint:

It is your responsibility to discuss with your child's caregiver any concerns that you have. If your specific concern involves non-compliance with licensing requirements and is not corrected through your discussions with the caregiver, you may file a complaint with the licensing representative for your county. Upon your request, you will receive a follow-up contact after the investigation has been completed.



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MAKING THE TRANSITION

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Once you've chosen a provider, it's time to prepare your child for the new setting. It is important for you to be comfortable with the setting as your child may sense it if you're not. Take your child to visit the home or center. Spend some time with him exploring the environment, meeting other children and getting to know the provider. When it's time to take him there for care, tell him he will be going back to the place he visited before.

Other helpful ideas include:

- Consult with the caregiver on ways to ease your child's transition, i.e., spending time there during the first week, bringing a favorite item from home, etc.
- Tell your child what he or she will be doing during the day ("You'll have play time with the other children, then you'll get lunch. After your nap, you'll get to play outdoors.")
- Allow plenty of time in the mornings to get ready.
- Say goodbye each day rather than slipping away. Children need to know that you have gone away temporarily, not just disappeared.
- Call during the day and check in.
- Pick your child up when you said you would.
- Try to alter your child's nap time to match the new arrangement.

STAY INVOLVED

25

Your interest and involvement are essential during the years your child is in child care. Look for opportunities to stay involved, such as volunteering for a field trip, joining your child for lunch or attending parent meetings. Drop by unannounced or arrive a little later or earlier than expected to see how the caregiver and your child are doing.

As time goes on, your child will be a good indicator of how things are going. Try to get your child to talk about his or her experiences each day. Take time periodically to talk to the director and your child's teacher about your child's progress and emotional well-being. Children may have difficulty separating from you in the morning, but generally once you've said your goodbyes and have left, the tearfulness goes away.

If your child exhibits unusual or persistent problems after a reasonable period of time, take a closer look. Here are some signs of potential problems:

- Changes in sleeping, eating or talking
- Child doesn't want to go to child care
- Child doesn't want to be near caregiver
- Unusual crying
- Clinging to you when you leave and excessive crying which lasts after you are gone

If you suspect problems, talk with the caregiver and try to identify concerns and solutions. Make sure your expectations are clearly understood. Lack of communication can lead to a build-up of tensions and affect everyone's sense of well-being. Parents and caregivers should work together as partners to ensure that each child's individual needs are met. If your efforts don't make a difference, you may need to consider finding a different child care setting. Every child has different needs, so trust your instincts.

CHILD ABUSE

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Although child abuse rarely occurs in child care settings, parents should take steps to protect their child from abuse. Child abuse and neglect can be physical, emotional, verbal or sexual and is defined as harm or threatened harm to a child's health or welfare.

Any person who suspects that a child has been abused or neglected or is in danger of being abused or neglected is mandated by law to report it. This includes caregivers, teachers, relatives and neighbors. A person making a report in good faith is immune from both civil and criminal liability.

A report can be made to any county office of the Department of Human Services or to the Child Abuse Hotline, 1-800-522-3511. The person making the report does not need to prove the abuse. Investigation and validation of child abuse reports are the responsibility of child welfare workers.

To reduce children's risk from abuse, you can:

- Take time to listen to them, discuss their activities and feelings and encourage them to come to you with problems or questions.
- Take responsibility for their safety, knowing who they're with and what they're doing.
- Respect your children's feelings and make them feel special, important and loved.

REDUCING CHILDHOOD ILLNESSES

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Children who are around other children may come in contact with many different illnesses. Although children may become ill more often when first entering child care, they will be developing immunities that will protect them later when they start school. There are several steps that you as a parent can take to help prevent the spread of illness.

1. Have your child immunized. Because young children in group care are exposed to various illnesses, *all* children in child care need to have current immunizations to protect themselves, their families, the other children and the caregivers. As a general rule, healthy children between the ages of 15 months and 5 years of age require at least:
   - three doses of polio vaccine;
   - four doses of DTP vaccine;
   - one to four doses of HbCV (HIB), depending on the child's first dose;
   - one dose each of measles, mumps and rubella vaccines administered on or after the first birthday.
2. Teach your child to wash his or her hands with soap and water after toileting and before eating.
3. If your child becomes sick while in care, pick him or her up as soon as possible. Keep a child at home if he or she has diarrhea, vomiting, fever, severe cough or rash. This may require advance arrangements for a substitute caregiver for the time your child is ill. Let the child care provider know what the illness was so that they can watch other children for symptoms.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

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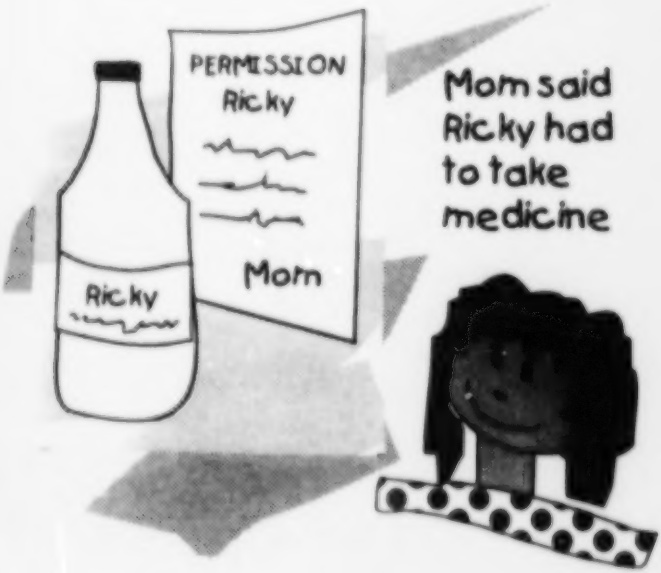
1. To ensure a safe arrival, children should be brought inside the center by an adult and taken to their classroom. Unless this is done, the teacher may not be aware of your child's arrival.
2. Help childproof the parking area. Always turn off your car and remove the keys. Don't leave valuables unlocked in your car; they could be stolen.
3. Don't send your child with toys, food or money without the caregiver's permission.
4. Dress your child in comfortable clothes suitable for active play and creative art activities (thongs are impractical and may be unsafe). Leave a change of clothes in case of accidents.
5. Let the caregiver know if any information on the child record cards has changed, such as a change in work telephone number, who can pick up the child or an immunization update.
6. Always sign a permission slip with specific instructions before leaving medication for your child.
7. Label all baby food jars, bottles, and medication with your child's name to reduce confusion.
8. Label your child's coat, hat, swimsuit, etc., with his or her name.

9. Be supportive of the caregiver's efforts to teach your child new skills. Practice new skills such as toilet-training at home.
10. Always pick your child up on time. If an emergency arises and you will be late, call and let them know.
11. Children frequently misbehave as soon as their parents arrive -- discuss with the caregiver which of you will set the limits during this transition time.
12. Pay on time -- caregivers and centers also have financial obligations to meet!
13. Be careful in discussing any problems or concerns in front of your child.



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Financial Help

If you need assistance in paying for child care, the Oklahoma Department of Human Services may be able to help you through the day care assistance program. It is designed to assist low-income parents who are working or enrolled in an education or training program or families of children with disabilities. Contact your local DHS county office for more information.

Resource and Referral Agencies

Many counties are served by a child care resource and referral agency. These organizations can provide referrals to child care providers in your community that meet your family's needs. To obtain additional information on resource and referral agencies in your area, call the Office of Child Care at 1-800-347-2276.

Licensing Services

You may contact the licensing representative if you wish to obtain a list of licensed child care providers, review a child care facility's case record or file a complaint. They can also provide you with a copy of the minimum licensing requirements as well as other information on child care. Call your local DHS office to obtain the name and telephone number of the licensing representative for your area.

Accreditation

Some child care facilities are accredited by a national accrediting system, such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children or the National Association for Family Child Care. Many quality programs are not accredited. However, it does show the provider has a strong commitment to the profession and has demonstrated the ability to provide quality care.

You can contact your local
DHS Child Care Licensing representative at:

Department of Human Services
Office of Child Care
P.O. Box 25352
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma 73125
(405) 521-3561
(800) 347-2276

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